

China's role in the Syrian conflict— a cautious quasi-mediator

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Introduction

The Syrian Civil war has been ongoing for a decade, originating from a social movement by the Syrian people demanding political reform and freedom before it developed into a proxy war involving various external actors with their own agendas. China's role in the Syrian Civil War has been understudied due to its limited involvement compared to the US, Russia, and regional countries. Nevertheless, as a great power and permanent member of the UN Security Council with veto power, China's stances and policies have a crucial impact on outcomes.

Since the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, China has branded itself as an impartial, patient, objective, and responsible power that tirelessly and genuinely mediates between different parties to push for a political resolution. China's Special Envoy to the Middle East, Wu Sike, illustrated in his article titled 'China is a genuine peacemaker' in the People's Daily on 6 March 2012 that China is the good friend of Syria and Arab countries, therefore China attaches great importance to the concerns of Arab people and is dedicated to maintaining peace and stability in the region. Wu further emphasised, as a responsible great power, China does not seek any self-interest in the Syrian conflict and does not shelter or deliberately oppose anyone. Instead, China hopes to contribute to the political settlement of the Syrian conflict and promote peace talks (Quanhecutan 劝和促谈).¹ To this end, China has maintained communications with all parties in Syria and has repeatedly initiated proposals to promote a political solution. Wu's claim that 'China is a genuine peacemaker' marked a shift in China's mediation policy towards the conflict.² Thereafter, the role of genuine peacemaker who tirelessly promote peace and talks be-

tween different parties and push for a political solution has been one of the most significant signatures of China in the Syrian conflict. Such a stance, policy and actions has been emphasised and echoed on multiple occasions by Chinese officials such as the Chinese Foreign Minister, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations, and Special Envoy of the Chinese government on the Syrian issue.

Indeed, China has initiated mediation diplomacy and appointed its first-ever Special Envoy for the Syrian issue to mark its efforts toward achieving a political solution. Nevertheless, it is important to consider to what extent such mediation diplomacy is genuine and effective. This research paper delves into this question by examining China's mediation diplomacy in the Syrian conflict through the theoretical framework of quasi-mediation proposed by Degang Sun and Yahia Zoubir in their paper analysing China's participation in conflict resolution in the Middle East and North Africa³ and relies on both Chinese and English primary and secondary sources.

The Framework of Quasi-Mediation Diplomacy

Mediation is a form of conflict management related to, yet distinct from, the efforts of the disputing parties. The disputing parties seek assistance or accept help from a third party, be it an individual, a group, a state, or an organization, to affect, change or influence their perception and behavior. Thus, the parties are able to resolve the dispute without using physical force.⁴

Traditionally, mediation means that both disputing parties and the mediator desire to abate, reduce or settle a conflict. In rare cases, mediation is initiated for shared humanitarian interests, usually in conjunction with other self-interest motivations.⁵ The motivations of a mediator to mediate are that it has the mandate and the obligation to intervene in a conflict. For example, the constitution of the Arab League gives it the mandate to mediate disputes between its members.⁶ (b) its interests would be unfavorably affected if the conflict continues. (c) it may be asked by one or both disputing parties to mediate. (d) it may act to preserve an alliance or intergovernmental organization of which it is a part, the EU or NATO, for example. (e) It may see mediation as an approach to expand and enhance their

influence, either by becoming a vital to the interests of the parties in the dispute or by winning gratitude (and possibly political loyalty) from one or both parties.⁷ The overarching motivation behind a mediator getting involved in a dispute and expending its resources is that it expects to get something from it.⁸

What does a mediator do, what can it do, or what is right to do in its efforts to control a dispute, on the one hand, depends on who the disputing parties are, what is the nature of the dispute, and what is the context of the dispute; on the other hand, it is also dependent on who the mediator is and what resources and competencies it possesses.⁹

The Middle East and North Africa has been one of the most unstable and insecure regions worldwide for decades. Global powers, principally the United States, Russia, and the EU, have been directly involved in Middle East conflicts as peace brokers for as long, but without achieving distinguishable success in bringing enduring security and peace to the region. Until recently, China was less visible as a peacebuilder on the world stage. However, as an emerging superpower that possesses significant economic and military muscle, China is now increasingly expected to play its part in sowing peace and helping the development of the MENA region. Nevertheless, as a non-traditional and non-Western power with an increasing presence in the region, China is pursuing a different strategy from its Western counterparts. The Non-interference principle of China has been one of the most fundamental guiding principles in determining its foreign policy. In order to change its national image as a “free-rider” in maintaining the world order by more actively participating in the governance of world affairs, China adopts the approach of mediation. International mediation is a carefully designed approach to conflict management, which is only initiated and implemented voluntarily by the parties to the dispute. Therefore, mediation is a legitimate way to “interfere” in the region’s affairs. It suits China perfectly by speaking to Beijing’s principle of Non-interference in the internal affairs of other sovereign states while giving China some influence over outcomes. Since 2002 when the Chinese government first adopted the special envoy mechanism in the Palestine-Israel issue,¹⁰ China has participated in conflict management as a mediator in several Middle Eastern conflicts, including the Iranian Nuclear Crisis, the Darfur

conflict, the Libyan war, and the Syrian war. Nevertheless, Sun and Zoubir argue that China's involvement in conflict management in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) 'has not translated into the formulation of genuine mediation diplomacy; at best, China conducts calculated quasi-mediation which helps it achieve some of its policy goals without having to get deeply involved.'¹¹

The framework of quasi-mediation was proposed and developed by Degang Sun and Yahia Zoubir in their paper titled *China's participation in conflict resolution in the Middle East and North Africa: A case of quasi-mediation diplomacy* in 2018. Sun and Zoubir define quasi-mediation as a 'cautious approach to conflict resolution whereby the would-be third party actor willingly participates but does not play a consequential role in the mediation process.'¹² The differences between mediation diplomacy and quasi-mediation diplomacy, according to Sun and Zoubir, are shown in Table 1.¹³ Unlike genuine mediation, which would be adopted by the third-party actor when their security and strategic interests are concerned in an ongoing conflict, the third-party actor prefers to initiate quasi-mediation diplomacy when their commercial, political, or diplomatic interests are affected but not its vital interests; The third-party actor tends to be more proactive in the genuine mediation diplomacy, whereas in the quasi-mediation diplomacy it tends to be more selective on a case-by-case basis; in the quasi-mediation diplomacy, the third-party prefer to participate in rather than dominate the process, to follow other leading actors' initiatives and frameworks rather than lead, to offer constructive ideas to revise the agenda rather than set an agenda, and to invest limited resources rather than substantive resources in the diplomatic effort. The third-party actor is shown to be highly reserved and cautious in its quasi-mediation diplomacy because it only aims at achieving a conflict de-escalation goal rather than conflict resolution.

Motivating Factors for China's Quasi-mediation

According to Sun and Zoubir, the driving force for China's quasi-mediation diplomacy in the Middle East and North Africa region in recent years is not ideology but necessity.¹⁴ In the 1950s, after the People's Republic of China was established, the MENA region served as a possible ally for the isolated and weak newly born China

in the struggle years is not ideology but necessity. In the 1950s, after the People's Republic of China was established, the MENA region served as a possible ally for the isolated and weak newly born China in the struggle against colonialism and imperialism and fighting for national liberation and prosperity. The common goal between China and some MENA counties united them despite geographic distance. During the 1960s and 1970 under Mao, China's foreign policy towards the world, including the MENA region, was driven by Mao's revolutionary ideology rather than economic development or national interests. Nevertheless, since China launched its economic reform and opening-up policy in the late 1970s, it has rediverted its focus and energy toward modernisation, developing its economy, and improving the living conditions of its people. As a result, the political struggle that used to dominate the agenda of Chinese policymakers has become a secondary priority after economic development. Accordingly, its engagement in MENA affairs has also been shifted to exploring access to energy supplies and economic cooperation for its modernisation process.¹⁵ China became a net oil importer in 1993, and since then, Middle Eastern countries have emerged as an increasingly important source of such a critical commodity.¹⁶ Moreover, with the increase in Chinese companies and nationals looking externally for economic opportunities and as China became the “world factory”, China’s economic activities and interests have enormously expanded in MENA countries. Therefore, stability and prosperity in MENA has become a more important concern for Chinese policymakers. Chinese investment, demand for energy resources, as well as the safety of Chinese nationals that live in the region can only be secured if peace and development in the region are maintained.

Table 1. Differentiating mediation from quasi-mediation diplomacy.

	Mediation diplomacy	Quasi-mediation diplomacy
Mediator's interests involved	Security and strategic interests	Commercial and political/diplomatic interests
Attitudes of mediators	Proactive	Selective on case-by-case basis
Positions	Dominating	Participating
Roles of mediators	Leading	Following
Mediation process	Agenda-setting	Agenda-revising
Resources that mediators commit to	Major resources	Minor resources
Primary goals	Conflict resolution	Conflict de-escalation

Nevertheless, from the 1980s until late 2000s, China's policy on conflict management in MENA conflicts was more "hands-off" in style despite its increasing national interests in the region and its responsibilities as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council with veto power. In Chinese policymakers' eyes, there was little to gain and little ability for China to get involved in the conflict management in the complicated MENA conflicts. This "free-rider" policy served China's interests at the time. However, with its increasing overseas interests in the region and its fast-developed comprehensive national strength, the "hands-off" policy ceased to be best for its interests. Both domestic China and the international community have been calling for China to be more active in global governance in international affairs, including MENA, and be a responsible great power that provides more public goods for the international community. The Chinese government has certainly responded to such calls but in a cautious and reactive manner rather than a proactive way. Moreover, the investment of resources, personnel, and the level of engagement of China in conflict management in MENA has differed by case, mainly depending on four factors: the relevance of the conflict to China's vital commercial interests, the scope of China's influence, the level of great power consensus, and the intractability of the crisis settlement.¹⁷

The relevance of the conflict to China's vital commercial interests: The more relevant the MENA region's hotspot issues are to China's core commercial interests, the more likely China is to engage in quasi-mediation in the conflicts.¹⁸ As mentioned above, apart from the legal responsibility a third-party actor owes to an international organisation or legal body, a third-party actor decides to mediate in a hotspot issue either because its interests are at stake, or it wants to expand its influence on the disputing parties or in the regional affairs at large through mediation.

According to Sun and Zoubir, China's commercial interests in MENA mainly lie in three aspects. First, to ensure the free flow of oil, stable energy prices, and supply to China. The second is to keep the balance of power in the region so that no outside power can monopolize MENA resources. The third is to maintain peace and stability in MENA and to prevent political turmoil that would jeopardize

Chinese investments in the region.¹⁹ Although Sun and Zoubir did not mention China's political interests in MENA in their paper, it is worth noting that China would also initiate a quasi-mediation effort in the regional conflicts when there is a need to defend or expand its political interests. China's political interest in MENA revolves around two aspects. The first is to maintain good relations with MENA countries, which would facilitate its economic cooperation with them. The second is to secure solidarity with MENA countries in defending their policies on human rights and the competition of the political systems against democratised Western countries. China would opt to initiate mediation diplomacy to avoid foreign intervention from Western-led countries that might lead to regime change. Mediation is also a valuable tool for the Chinese government to illustrate, explain, and gain support for its decisions and behaviours from MENA countries when China makes unpopular decisions, such as vetoing a draft resolution in the UN Security Council.

Scope of China's influence over conflicting parties in the MENA: The ability of an actor to influence the course of a conflict is also a vital factor it will consider before initiating mediation. The more influence China can expect to exert over the parties in a MENA conflict, the more likely it is to engage in quasi-mediation diplomacy.²⁰ If a third-party actor possesses more resources, namely the "carrot and stick", to impose either incentives or pressure on the disputing parties to make a compromise, the more likely they are to initiate mediation as it means a higher possibility of success of the mediation effort. As Sun and Zoubir argue, at the present stage, despite China expressing its willingness to play a more active and constructive role in resolving conflicts in the region, it is questionable whether China has sufficient resources to effectively influence the disputing parties in the MENA region. Sun and Zoubir questioned if 'China has any motivation to play that role at all.'²¹ They believe that even Chinese leaders admitted that the government could not deploy significant resources to conflict management in difficult MENA issues.²² Some Chinese scholars echo this argument because they believe MENA is the "tomb" of great powers, and China should be cautious and think twice before getting involved.²³ Resolving conflicts in MENA requires a lot of regional experience and expertise, which China certainly does not have, in conjunction with determination and

resources, which China does not appear willing to invest in mediation.

Level of Great Power Consensus: In a multipolar world where a country can rarely resolve a conflict alone, the consensus among great powers over the conflict is significant. The higher the great power consensus on addressing a conflict in MENA, the higher likelihood that China would engage with the quasi-mediation. China would refrain from mediating in a conflict not only when fewer interests are at stake but also when there is low or even no consensus among great powers over the conflict's resolution. Compared with other traditional players such as the U.S., the EU, and Russia, China does not have substantial strategic interests in MENA, and its commercial and political interests in the region are comparatively limited, China does not have a solid motivation to get involved in the complicated and problematic conflicts in the region. Besides, China does not have enough resources, expertise, and experience to deal with the thorny conflicts in the region. Thus, China's policy is to husband its resources, allocating them to the relatively easy-to-manage type of conflicts with likely favourable outcomes rather than difficult ones. Therefore, if the international community has no consensus over the hotspot issue, China would be hesitant to participate in conflict management as a mediator as it has little chance of success. China believes that failure in its mediation would undermine its fragile image as a responsible great power.²⁴

The intractability of the conflict settlement: The easier a conflict in MENA can be resolved, the more likely China would engage with quasi-mediation diplomacy in the conflict.²⁵ As a new player in the conflict management domain, China has limited resources, personnel, and experience in dealing with MENA conflicts, therefore, it needs to use the resources it does possess effectively. China is far more cautious in involving itself in a prolonged and complicated conflict that the international community has struggled to resolve. Sun Degang categorized Middle East conflicts into two types: exogenous conflicts (Waishengxing wenti 外生性问题) and endogenous conflicts (neishengxing wenti 内生性问题). Sun argues that China has more actively participated in conflict management in exogenous conflicts

such as the Iranian nuclear issue. In contrast, China has been more cautious in endogenous conflicts such as the Syrian Civil War and the Libyan Civil War. China has been more cautious in becoming involved in a country's internal affairs and thus often opposes proposals of Western countries regarding conflict management in Middle East conflicts. The reason behind the Non-interference policy, according to Sun, is that the U.S. has used "democracy", "liberty", and "human rights" as excuses to interfere in other sovereign states' internal affairs. China and the Middle Eastern are all targets for such interference. Therefore, Middle East conflicts, especially endogenous conflicts, have been and will continue to be the main battleground for the emerging power China and its Western counterparts around the issues of sovereignty, the responsibility to protect, and human rights.²⁶ Such endogenous conflicts also test the wisdom of foreign policymakers in China to fulfil its responsible great power role and non-interventionist partner role to the Middle Eastern countries at the same time.²⁷

Four types of China's quasi-mediation diplomacy

China has initiated quasi-mediation with various levels of engagement in MENA conflicts according to the considerations of the relevance of its interests in a conflict, the influence and leverage it has over the disputing parties, the extent the international community has agreed on how to address the conflict, and the difficulties of managing the conflict. According to Sun and Zoubir, China's quasi-mediation diplomacy can be categorised into four types with the level of involvement from high to low: multifaceted intervention, proactive involvement, limited intercession, and indirect participation.²⁸

Multifaceted Intervention: In Sun and Zoubir's words, multifaceted intervention refers to 'China's huge investment of diplomatic resources whereby Beijing seeks to partake in the agenda of the negotiation, including sending special envoys and tackling hot-spot disputes to influence the outcome.' In such quasi-mediation efforts, the Chinese government pays special attention to the conflict and often gets top policymakers such as the president, premier, and ministers to directly participate in the process of facilitating dialogue between disputing parties.²⁹

Moreover, to enable disputing parties to make a compromise and reach an agreement in a short timeframe, the Chinese government would offer “nudging and assistance”, which is similar to the “carrot and stick” strategy of Western countries. “Assistance” refers to the incentives such as economic aid, trade policy skewed for disputing parties’ benefit, tariff reduction on the imports, and invitation for disputing parties to visit China. China tries to persuade disputing parties to make compromises towards an agreement by offering such benefits. “Nudging” refers to the reduction of economic aid, limitation of high-level visits, and limit the import of commodities from the disputing parties, which aims to impose pressure on disputing parties to move towards an agreement.³⁰

When the Chinese government adopts multifaceted intervention in its mediation diplomacy, usually the hot spot conflict imposes a threat to China’s core interests. China preserves good relations with all parties concerned in the conflict and is able to exert influence on them, there is a high level of consensus among the international community on the resolution of conflict, and the conflict itself is relatively easier to be dealt with. China’s quasi-mediation diplomacy in the Darfur conflict would serve as an example of this type of case. Nevertheless, China’s security and strategic interest are less concerned in the MENA region, thus China would restrain from playing the leading role to proactively mediate between disputing parties like it did in the North Korean nuclear crisis.³¹

Proactive Involvement: Proactive involvement is the second highest level on the spectrum of China's quasi-mediation diplomacy. When China initiates such a strategy, it typically invests considerate diplomatic resources into the practice, including sending special envoys to address the conflict and getting top leaders involved in settlement of the conflict. However, compared to its multifaceted intervention strategy, in proactive involvement, China does not aim to speed up the negotiation process and achieve an agreement in a short period, therefore, it would not adopt its “nudging” or “assistance” strategy to push disputing parties to make a compromise. China adopts a proactive involvement strategy in a conflict where its interests are less directly affected, it has some influence over the disputing parties, and the international community has a relatively high consensus on how

to address the conflict, yet with disruptions of the consensus at times, and the conflict is not relatively easy to manage. China's quasi-mediation effort in the Israel-Palestine conflict is an example of proactive involvement.³²

Limited Intercession: Limited Intercession is a low-level type of China's quasi-mediation diplomacy, in which China puts insignificant diplomatic resources into its practice. In its limited intercession diplomacy, top leaders rarely participate directly in the mediation process. Instead, the government sends lower-level officials representing the government to conduct the mediation. China participates lightly as a facilitator in mediation conducted by other leading actors. When China does it solely, it does not aim to achieve an outcome in a short period but to mark its presence. Besides, when it initiates a mediation effort, it prefers to expound its stances and policies to all parties concerned and facilitate conversations between different parties without providing any concrete plan or timetable. On occasion, it sends a special envoy to participate in the mediation process, yet often temporarily and symbolically. Overall, it is a cost-free strategy that does not commit China to concrete involvement. China adopts such a strategy when a conflict is only secondary to its national interests, even to its commercial and political interests, China does not have enough leverage over disputing parties, and the international community does not have a consensus on how to move forward to address the conflict, and it is impossible to achieve a positive outcome in a short time. China's quasi-mediation effort made in the Libyan War is an example.³³

Indirect participation: Indirect participation constitutes the lowest level of China's quasi-mediation diplomacy, in which it does not actively participate. However, it takes part in the conflict management that international organisation, such as the United Nations, conduct. In a conflict that affects China's interests insignificantly, China and the disputing parties have little strategic trust and confidence in each other, there is a low level of attention and consensus between international actors, and it is challenging to be resolved in a short period, China initiates indirect participation strategy. Sun and Zoubir considered it a "disinterested kind of diplomacy".³⁴ In an interview Sun and Zoubir conducted and presented in their paper, Chinese diplo-

mats explained that in approaching such, they often divided them into two stages: crisis management and post-conflict reconstruction. In the first stage, China refrains from playing an active role as it is highly risky, intensely unpredictable, and heavily demanding input of diplomatic resources. However, China typically shows some interest in the second stage of post-conflict construction when it is a safe and predictable environment for Chinese companies to put their feet in.³⁵

Limited Intercession of China in the Syrian Conflict

According to Sun and Zoubir, China's quasi-mediation diplomacy in the Syrian conflict is identified as quasi-mediation diplomacy rather than genuine mediation. Furthermore, it is only qualified as the lower-level engagement on the spectrum of its quasi-mediation diplomacy—limited intercession. In Sun and Zoubir's analysis, the relevance of the Syrian conflict to China's vital commercial interests is average, the scope of China's influence over the disputing parties in the Syrian conflict is minimal, the level of great power consensus in the Syrian conflict is high. Nevertheless, the intractability of the Syrian conflict settlement is significant. Therefore, China adopted a limited intercession strategy.³⁶ This article agrees with such arguments, and the supporting evidence will be illustrated in the following section of the paper.

Low-level government officials participate in the mediation process:

In the limited intercession diplomacy, according to Sun and Zoubir, no top leaders from China participate directly in the process of facilitating the negotiations. Instead, lower-ranking officials or representatives from the Chinese embassies would be sent to participate in conflict management. Alternatively, various parties concerned would be invited to Beijing to discuss the conflict. This characteristic speaks to the case of Chinese quasi-mediation diplomacy in the Syrian conflict. Rarely have the Chinese President or the Premier participated directly in the Syrian conflict throughout its duration. From the early period of the Syrian conflict from 2011 to 2014, it was China's Special Envoy to Middle East, Wu Sike, former Chinese ambassador to Syria Li Huaxin as the representative of the Chinese Foreign Minister, and Chinese Government Special Envoy and Vice Foreign

Minister Zhai Jun that mainly carried out quasi-mediation diplomacy. It was not until May 2012 that the Chinese Foreign Minister started participating in the process of promoting peace and stability in the Syrian conflict.

Nevertheless, the Chinese foreign minister, be it Yang Jiechi or his successor Wang Yi, has mainly received the various parties, including disputing parties and UN officials in Beijing, to discuss the matters at hand. Alternatively, the Chinese foreign minister participated in the multilateral meetings held by international organisations and actors over the Syrian issue and met with disputing parties to expound on China's positions and policies during such international meetings. However, foreign Minister Wang Yi did not actively conduct shuttle diplomacy among parties concerned to push for a political settlement.

Indeed, China appointed its first-ever special envoy on the Syrian Issue in 2016, indicating the importance of the Syrian Issue in Chinese foreign policy making. The Chinese government made a high-profile statement that China's appointment of the special envoy on the Syrian Issue is to allow it to better play its role in promoting peace and talks and actively contributing China's wisdom and solutions to conflict management.³⁷ However, in analysing the timing of China's appointment of its special envoy on the Syrian Issue, we see that it coincided with the period when the ceasefire agreement was generally implemented, humanitarian aid continued to advance, and the Syrian government and the opposition parties restarted the Geneva peace talks.³⁸ Therefore, it was convenient for the Chinese government to take a high-profile move to mark its presence without overly committing resources.

Participating lightly in the context of mediation directed by others:

When China initiates a limited intercession strategy, it tends to participate lightly in the process directed by other leading actors, which is the case of China's quasi-mediation practice in the Syrian conflict.

Throughout the conflict from 2011 until the present, China has always advocated for other actors, be it the Arab League, the United Nations bodies, Russia, and Turkey, to lead the peace-making pro-

cess. For example, during the initial period of the Syrian crisis, Wu Sike, the Chinese special envoy to Middle East, pointed out during his visit to Syria in October 2011 that China appreciates and supports the Arab League playing an active and constructive role in the Syrian issue.³⁹ In March 2012, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson made a public speech regarding the situation in Syria, stating that ‘China welcomes the appointment of the joint special envoy for the Syrian crisis by the United Nations and the Arab League, and supports his constructive role in promoting a political solution of the crisis.’⁴⁰ In December 2015, Foreign Minister, Wang Yi attended the UN Security Council Ministerial Meeting on Syria, emphasizing that the United Nations should play a bigger and more active role in the process of political settlement as it is the legitimate and authoritative body, and is the biggest common denominator among all the parties involved in the process. China hoped that the United Nations would advance its work in an orderly manner following its mandate and play a more active role in integrating opposition parties and coordinating international anti-terrorism operations.⁴¹ On 26 January 2022, Ambassador of Chinese Mission to the United Nations, Zhai Jun, made remarks at the Security Council Briefing on Syria that ‘we also welcome the new round of meetings of the Astana process last month, and hope that the process will continue to contribute to a comprehensive solution to the Syrian issue.’⁴²

When an actor is leading the mediation process of the Syrian conflict, China actively exchanges opinions and policies with the leading actor, providing consultation for the draft plans, initiatives, and roadmaps. For example, at the beginning of the Syrian conflict, when the Arab League assumed the leading role in searching for a political settlement, China sent envoys and official representatives to Arab countries to deliver Chinese messages and keep themselves informed about the moves of the Arab League in the process. Chinese officials have constantly expressed that China attached great importance to the Arab League’s position and concerns in the Syrian issue and has always supported the mediation effort of the Arab League. Regarding how they have supported it, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson gave an example in a press conference at the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Ministry on 7 February 2012, saying that ‘China has actively participated in the consultations on the relevant draft resolutions of

the UNSC submitted by Morocco, a member of the Arab League. We will continue to support the Arab League in playing an active and constructive role in the Syrian issue.⁴³ Similar diplomatic activities were also taken in the mediation process led by the UN-Arab League Joint Special Envoy Kofi Annan, his successors Lakhdar Brahimi and Staffan de Mistura, Russia, Iran, and Turkey.

Once the international community reaches a consensus on a particular framework, roadmap, or timetable proposed by the leading actors and China agrees, China would spare no effort endorsing and promoting such initiatives. In China's quasi-mediation practice, China has always referred to the initiatives of other leading actors in its meeting with disputing parties, persuading disputing parties to act under such frameworks. In other words, China has offered few original ideas for political resolution in its mediation diplomacy. For example, a delegation of the Syrian opposition group, the Syrian National Council, led by President Ghalioun, visited Beijing at the invitation of the Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs in May 2012. During their meeting with the Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, Yang pointed out that the mediation of the UN-Arab League Joint Special Envoy Kofi Annan provided a realistic way out and an important opportunity for a political solution to the crisis. All parties concerned in Syria should abide by their ceasefire commitments, support and cooperate with the work of the UN monitoring mission, and create conditions for an inclusive political process to begin as soon as possible.⁴⁴

A further example is the announcement by the Syrian government in April 2012, that it would implement a ceasefire and withdraw troops from some towns, marking a success of the mediating effort of Kofi Annan, the joint special envoy of the UN and Arab League. China believes it contributed to such success by persuading the Syrian government to compromise. The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson illustrates the effort China made: 'We communicate with Special Envoy Annan and offer full support for his mediation efforts. A few days ago, Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi sent a letter to his Syrian counterpart, positively appraising the Syrian government's decision on the ceasefire and withdrawal of troops. He hoped the Syrian government would earnestly fulfil its commitments, support, and coop-

erate with Annan's mediation efforts with practical actions and maintain the political resolution process. Furthermore, Chinese officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs met with the Syrian ambassador to China, emphasising that the most urgent task is to implement Annan's "six-point proposal", seize the rare opportunity and fully implement the commitments such as troop withdrawal and ceasefire promptly. Our officials from the Chinese embassy in Syria and the Permanent Mission of China to the United Nations have persuaded and discussed issues with the Syrian government regarding the implementation of troop withdrawal and ceasefire commitments on multiple occasions. We have also established communications with the Syrian opposition, calling on them to cease fire and implement Annan's proposal immediately. Moreover, we have also maintained communication with countries from the region, the Arab League, Russia, and other relevant parties on promoting political resolution. Therefore, we can be confident that the work done by China is effective".⁴⁵

Apart from endorsing and vocally supporting other leading actors' initiatives, China has also provided financial and personnel support to ensure a successful result. On 21 April 2012, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 2043 in response to the Syrian conflict, in which the international community agreed to set up the United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS). UNSMIS comprised 300 unarmed military observers and an appropriate civilian component to monitor the ceasefire of all forms of violence by all parties and fully implement Annan's six-point proposal. After establishing the UNSMIS, the UN Secretariat formally invited more than 70 countries, including China, to contribute personnel in the peacekeeping operations as military observers.⁴⁶ Approved by the General Staff of the People's Liberation Army, China sent in a total of 9 PLA officers who had previous experience with UN peacekeeping missions and good military and political backgrounds. These officers received intensive training on anti-terrorism, anti-riot, anti-hijacking, explosives identification, and first aid before joining the UNSMIS, with China becoming 1 of 43 countries that contributed military personnel to the mission.⁴⁷

Another example is that in October 2013, the United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2118, setting out the overall goal of destroying Syria's chemical arsenal and detailing the roadmap for the next step. Immediately after the resolution passed, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi expressed that China was willing to send experts to participate in the relevant work and provide funding for the mission.⁴⁸ Later, on 7 January 2014, a Chinese ship, the *Yancheng*, arrived, joining Russian and European counterparts to escort ships picking up a chemical arsenal from Syria.⁴⁹ It was the first time for a Chinese warship to perform escort missions in the Mediterranean. Chinese official media Xinhua News commented on the mission saying that 'The unfamiliar environment presents a severe test for the Chinese navy. Nevertheless, it also serves a chance to demonstrate the capability of our navy and the spirit of courage to fulfil its peaceful mission.' From the Chinese perspective, participating in the escort mission again shows the world that China is a responsible great power contributing to regional stability, peace, and safety, and bringing "positive energy (Zheng Nengliang 正能量)" to the world.⁵⁰

When it mediates independently, it aims to expound its policies and stances without providing any concrete framework, roadmap, and approaches:

Apart from playing a facilitator role in the mediation directed by other leading actors, China has offered to mediate independently at an elementary level. Typically, the Chinese officials expound the Chinese government's stances and policies to all parties concerned in their mediation practice. Chinese diplomats would refrain from giving the impression of assuming a leading role and often offers no concrete suggestion of a timetable or roadmap for the next steps to ease the conflict. It neither imposed any significant pressure nor incentives through "nudging and assistance" policies to push disputing parties to compromise towards an agreement. These are cost-free strategies that do not commit China to any substantial resource input as it only aims to mark its presence as a responsible great power rather than change the course of events.⁵¹

China took a seemingly proactive step of appointing a Special Envoy on the Syrian issue. The purpose of doing so, as China indicated, is

to 'better play its role in promoting peace and talks between different parties and pushing for a political solution (QuanheCutan 劝和促谈), offering Chinese wisdom and approach to the resolution (Zhongguo Zhihui he Fangan 中国智慧和方案), strengthening productive communication with all concerned parties, and playing a constructive role in searching for an ultimate and proper resolution for the Syrian conflict.'⁵² China specifically chose a very experienced senior diplomat, Xie Xiaoyan, who has served as the former Chinese ambassador to Iran, Ethiopia and as a representative to the African Union. They believed that this experience would enable Xie to perform his duties effectively due to his familiarity with Middle Eastern affairs. Since Xie's appointment, he visited and held meetings with different parties, including officials from the Syrian government, opposition parties, the UN special envoy, and regional countries such as Lebanon and Iran. Nevertheless, the main content of Xie's diplomatic practice is merely to expound on the Chinese government's principles, stances, and policies and exchange opinions with different parties. In Xie's first mediation effort in Geneva in April 2016, he established contact and relations with different parties and delivered the Chinese government's stance and fundamental principles on the Syrian issue.⁵³ In April 2016, Xie visited Syria and held meetings with representatives from the Syrian government and opposition parties. Nevertheless, again, the main purpose of the meeting was indicated in the title shown in an article published in *People's Daily*, 'Special Envoy of the Chinese Government on the Syrian Issue Explains China's Position.'⁵⁴ In December 2016, when the negotiation between the Syrian government and the opposition parties was facing an impasse, Xie revisited Syria and held meetings with representatives from both sides. During the meeting, Xie expressed that the Chinese government tries to listen to the views and considerations of both the Syrian government and the opposition regarding the future development of the situation and how to move forward toward a political resolution.⁵⁵ However, Xie did not propose or discuss any concrete suggestions or initiatives on how the resolution should be reached. Instead, later in July 2017, at the meeting with Iranian officials and scholars during his visit to Iran, Xie stated that the Syrian people should independently decide the future of Syria, including whether Assad will stay or leave, the formation of the government, and the constitution. Xie argues that the international community should ac-

cept that the Syrian people can solve their problems and suggests ‘do not try to manage the issues that should not be and could not be managed.’⁵⁶

Often, China’s quasi-mediation diplomacy in the Syrian conflict were conducted right after China’s vetoes of draft resolutions in the UNSC, indicating that the aim of China’s mediation is to secure understanding and support of other countries for its actions rather than to achieve peace in the conflict. At times, China sent representatives to visit disputing parties after its veto on the draft resolutions involving any criticism, demand on or threat toward the Assad regime to show China is the facilitator, promoter, and contributor of the process of the searching for political settlement for the conflict, not the spoiler. Wu Sike, China’s special envoy to the Middle East, visited Syria and held meetings with Syrian Deputy Minister and Foreign Minister Walid Muallem in October 2011 right after its veto along with Russia on the draft resolution proposed by France and United Kingdom.⁵⁷ The draft heavily condemned ‘the continued grave and systematic human rights violations and the use of force against civilians by the Syrian authorities.’ The draft urges ‘all sides to reject violence and extremism’ and called for ‘an inclusive Syrian-led political process conducted in an environment free from violence, fear, intimidation and extremism, and aimed at effectively addressing the legitimate aspirations and concerns of Syria’s population.’⁵⁸ The draft resolution also ‘would have warned of options for actions to be considered against the Government of President Bashar al-Assad if the unfolding situation warranted, including measures under the section of the United Nations Charter that allowed sanctions.’⁵⁹ China’s stance and decision to veto the draft resolution was explained by its Ambassador Li Baodong. Li explained that China was greatly concerned about the violence in Syria. Nevertheless, the content of the draft resolution would only add another layer of complication to the current tension. ‘The international community should provide constructive assistance to facilitate the achievement of the objectives of the Syrian-led inclusive political process’, said Li, ‘in the meantime it should fully respect the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of Syria.’⁶⁰ Besides, he added, the draft resolution was heavily focused on pressuring the Syrian government solely to stop the violence, with the threat of sanctions, which does not help resolve

the crisis.⁶¹ 'Whether the Security Council will take further action on the question of Syria should depend on whether it facilitates the easing of tension in Syria, whether it helps the defusing of differences through political dialogue, whether it contributes to maintain peace and security in the Middle East.' Li stated.⁶² Not surprisingly, China's veto along with its Russian counterpart was heavily criticised by the U.S. and other Western countries. Britain's UN ambassador, Mark Lyall Grant, commented on the veto that 'by blocking this resolution, the onus is now on those countries to step up their efforts and persuade the Syrian government to end the violence and pursue genuine reform.'⁶³ Thus, Wu Sike's visit in Syria and emphasized in his meetings with Syrian officials that 'the highest priority right now is that the relevant parties of Syria proceed from the interest of Syria and the Syrian people, put an immediate stop to any violent acts and bloodshed and ease up the tension as quickly as possible. The Syrian government should also accelerate implementing reform commitments, launch and promote an inclusive political process with the participation of different parties as early as possible, and respond to the rational expectations and requests of the people.' is an act to show the world that China is taking the "onus" to 'step up their efforts and persuade the Syrian government to end the violence and pursue genuine reform.'⁶⁴

At other times, China sent officials to visit Middle Eastern countries especially the Arab League members after its block of the draft resolution drawn up by these countries, to illustrate China's point of view, ease the tension and criticism, and secure the understanding and support of these countries. Li Huaxin, Chinese former Ambassador to Syria, visited Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar as the representative of the Chinese government on 10 February 2012, to exchange views with relevant officials of the above countries and the Arab League on the situation in Syria. Li paid the visit to these countries right after China vetoed the draft resolution drafted by a lot of Arab countries including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Tunisia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates and other countries on 4 February 2012.⁶⁵ The draft resolution expressed grave concern over the deteriorating situation in Syria and strongly condemned the human rights violations by all parties. It demanded the Syrian authority implement the elements of a plan pro-

posed by states of Arab League on 22 January 2012 ‘without delay’. It also decided ‘to review the implementation of this resolution within 21 days and event of non-compliance, to consider further measures.’⁶⁶ China vetoed again, along with its Russian counterpart as ‘China believes that under the current situation, unilaterally exerting pressure on the Syrian government, prejudice the outcome of the dialogue, or impose any solution will not help resolve the Syrian issue, but may lead to further complicating the situation.’⁶⁷ Sending officials to visit countries who proposed the draft resolution that it vetoed presented as an reassuring act. Regarding the content of such official visits, Li concluded in the press conference after his meeting with Nabi Elaraby, the then Secretary General of the Arab League, that the two sides had a very candid and helpful conversation. He thoroughly explained China’s position over the Syrian issue to Elaraby and Elaraby briefed the situation of the Foreign Ministers Meeting of the Arab League. The two sides agreed that regional peace and stability should be maintained and a peaceful and political solution to the Syrian issue should be pursued. The two sides ought to maintain communication and exchanges on this issue. Li further emphasized that China and Arab countries have a long and traditional friendship and cooperative relations and have maintained close consultation and coordination in terms of political affairs. As the situation in Syria continues to escalate recently, the main purpose of his visit to Egypt, the Arab League and other Arab countries is to introduce the positions and principles of Chinese government and listen to the opinions of the Arab side.⁶⁸ In other words, to gain the understanding from Arab courtiers over its voting behaviour on the draft resolution in the UNSC and assure “zero-problems” in its relations with Arab countries.

Such purposes were indicated again later on 07 February 2012 in the Chinese Foreign Spokesperson’s remarks on the situation in Syria and other issues. During the press conference, a journalist asked the question ‘the Arab world has always been satisfied with China’s position on regional issues, but the recent attack on the Chinese embassy in Libya shows that the Arab world might not be very happy about China’s position on the Syrian “revolution”, have Chinese officials concerned about the views of the Arab world towards China changed?’ The Spokesperson replied that ‘China and Arab countries

have a long history of exchanges, and we have traditionally good relations. Chinese people, Syrian people and Arab people are genuine friends with each other. For a long time, we have shown understanding and support for each other on major issues. We sincerely hope that people from the region will experience less turbulence and suffering and live a peaceful life so they could concentrate on building a better homeland and realize development and prosperity. China will continue to firmly develop relations with the Arab world, and we also believe that Arab countries will continue to commit themselves to developing friendly relations with China and deepening cooperation between the two sides. We have faith in this.⁶⁹

Nevertheless, soon later, from 10 to 14 March 2012, the Chinese government's special envoy and assistant Foreign Minister Zhang Ming, visited Saudi Arabia and Egypt. After holding the meetings with officials of these two countries as well as the Secretary General of the Arab League Nabil Elaraby, Zhang Ming was pleased to announce that relevant parties have offered China their understanding, appreciation, and positive comments on China's proposal for a political solution to the Syrian issue.⁷⁰ Zhang stressed that 'China, Saudi Arabia and other Arab states of the Gulf have consistent overall goals on the Syrian issue and all hope to end the violence as soon as possible, alleviate the suffering of the Syrian people, promote political solution to the Syrian issue and maintain regional peace and stability. China is willing to keep contacts and communication with Saudi Arabia and other Arab states of the Gulf to continue to play a constructive role for the political solution of the Syrian issue.'⁷¹ Such a series of intensive visits paid by Chinese representatives to different parties concerned in the Syrian conflict, indicating that mediation proves to be a useful tool for Chinese government explain its policies and getting support for its interests.

In addition to expounding the Chinese government's stance, principles, and policies regarding the Syrian issue, Chinese officials have attempted to offer their initiatives and ideas for moving forward with the political solution yet remain vague in the details. China initiated the "Four-point proposal" in 2012, the "Five Principles" for political settlement of the Syrian issue in 2014, and the "Four-step initiative" in 2015 for searching the political settlement of the Syrian conflict.

Nevertheless, all of these proposals of China are about laying out the principles of addressing the conflict such as calling for all parties to stop the violence, advocating the role of UN and regional organizations in leading the process of mediation, persisting in pursuing political resolution for the conflict, insisting that Syrian people should independently determine the future of their country, and calling on the international community to provide more humanitarian aid but not to politicalize it, but failed to offer practical guidance on how to achieve these goals.^{72 73}

For example, On 31 October 2012, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi received the UN-Arab League Joint Special Envoy to Syria, Lakhdar Brahimi, in Beijing. During the meeting, Yang expressed that in order to facilitate the political settlement of the Syrian issue, China proposed a “Four-point proposal,” calling for a gradual ceasefire and political solution to end the conflict in Syria. The specific content is ‘1. Relevant parties in Syria should make every effort to stop fighting and violence and cooperate actively with the mediation efforts of Lakhdar Brahimi, the UN-Arab League Joint Special Representative, in this context. Relevant parties should implement effective steps towards a ceasefire, for example, region by region or phase by phase, expand the areas of ceasefire, realize disengagement, and eventually bring an end to all armed conflict and violence. 2. Relevant parties in Syria should appoint empowered interlocutors as soon as possible so that, assisted by Joint Special Representative Brahimi and the international community, they can formulate through consultations a roadmap of political transition, establish a transitional governing body of broad representation, and implement political transition so as to end the Syrian crisis at an early date. To ensure a safe, stable and calm transition, the continuity and effectiveness of Syria’s governmental institutions must be maintained. 3. The international community should work with greater urgency and responsibility to fully cooperate with and support Joint Special Representative Brahimi’s mediation efforts and make real progress in implementing the communiqué of the Geneva foreign ministers’ meeting of the Action Group for Syria, Mr. Annan’s six-point plan and relevant Security Council resolutions. The positive efforts of the Arab League and countries in the region in search of a political settlement should be valued. 4. Relevant parties should take concrete steps to ease the hu-

manitarian crisis in Syria. The international community should increase humanitarian assistance to the Syrian people and ensure proper resettlement of refugees beyond the Syrian border and timely aid for those in need within Syria. The Syrian government and various parties should render full cooperation to the work of the United Nations and relevant neutral institutions to provide humanitarian assistance in all conflict-affected regions and ensure the safety of their personnel. At the same time, humanitarian issues should not be politicized and humanitarian assistance should not be militarized.’⁷⁴

Factors Accounting for China's Limited Intercession in the Syrian conflict

The relevance of the Syrian conflict to China's vital interests

Unlike many other MENA countries that have deepened their relations via economic cooperation after the 1990s, mutual political trust and support united China and Syria from 1950 onwards. Syria was one of the first Arab countries to offer recognition and establish diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China in the 1950s. The common goal of fighting against colonialism and imperialism and striving for national independence, unity, and prosperity bonded each other. China has been aware of the significant strategic position of Syria and thus has constantly been showing good gestures to Syria by being vocal in supporting Syria's fight against American imperialism and Israeli Zionism. In return, Syria provided strong support in China's fight against the aggression from the U.S. and its ally, the Guomintang in Taiwan. Syria was also one of the sponsors of the UN General Assembly resolution that restored China's lawful seat in the UNSC. Nevertheless, such friendly bilateral relations remained limited at the time. Syria attached more importance to the Soviet Union as it had more concrete economic, military, and political power to materialise its support for Syria in its struggle with the U.S.-led Western powers and Israel. The bilateral relations between China and Syria became frigid after China openly confronted the Soviet Union. It was not until the 1990s, when the Soviet Union collapsed, that Syria took China seriously as a possible alternative in supporting its ongoing struggle. The mismatch in national propriety between China and Syria was a leading factor in the lack of fruitful relations in this period. During this period, China had diverted its attention and energy into the modernisation process, thus becoming less involved in the

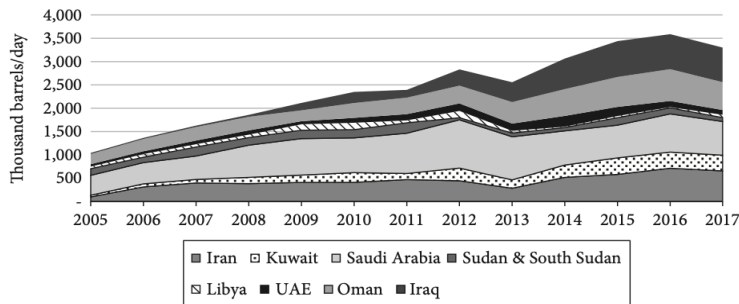
political struggle of Syria. As a result, bilateral relations remained friendly but superficial.

After Basher al-Assad took power, the bilateral relations between China and Syria started to accelerate. Basher al-Assad adopted an economic liberalization strategy aimed at improving Syria's economic development and national strength. China, a country that had successfully transformed itself from an impoverished and backward country into the biggest developing country while preserving political stability, came to the attention of the Assad regime.⁷⁵ China presented the Assad regime with experience, an economic development model, and an alternative way to the integration into the world market.⁷⁶ In 2004, Bashar al-Assad became the first Syrian leader to visit China. As the fruitful outcome of the official visit, economic and cultural cooperation between the two sides expanded greatly. In 2009, China became the fifth most important trading partner for Syria after Italy, Iraq, Turkey, and Germany.⁷⁷ The strong political trust between China and Syria facilitated economic cooperation between two sides. In return, increased economic ties deepened the mutual political trust and support.⁷⁸ Indeed, Syria presented itself as the most significant and loyal supporter of China in the issues related to human rights, Taiwan, Xinjiang, Tibet, and the South China Sea. It also accused the U.S. led. Western countries of being hypocrites that intervene in other countries' domestic affairs.⁷⁹

However, due to its limited reserves of natural resources and domestic market, the unstable and relatively closed political and financial environment, and a rather late starting point of bilateral economic cooperation, Syria's position in China's economic interests remained insignificant despite good political relations. Unlike resources rich countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Sudan, South Sudan, and Iraq, Syria did not play an essential role in China's import of natural resources. Regarding China's investment in Syria, as shown in tables 2 and 3, China's FDI in Syria constitutes a minimal amount, especially compared with other Middle Eastern countries. In 2010, China's Outward FDI in Syria was only one forty-third of that in Iran. In 2016, China's Outward FDI in all countries presented

increased dramatically, including Libya, but it remained the same in Syria as in 2010. Figure 2 shows that between 2002 and 2016, no substantial Chinese communities were living and working in Syria. The combined data indicates that the Syrian conflict did not impose an urgency for China to protect its economic investment, nationals, and energy security. China does not have substantial practical interests in Syria. Therefore, China does not have sufficient motivation to intervene in the Syrian conflict as a mediator conducting genuine mediation.

Figure 1: China's main crude oil suppliers in North Africa and the Middle East



Source: HIS Market. Compiled by Andrea Ghiselli in his book *Protecting China's Interests Oversea*, p.86⁸⁰

Table 2: 2003-2010 China's Outward Foreign Direct Investment Stock in WANA (Unit: US\$1)

Country	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Iran	2,215	4,668	5,608	11,059	12,235	9,427	21,780	71,516
Iraq	43,696	43,487	43,487	43,618	2,245	2,079	2,258	48,345
Saudi Arabia	24	209	5,845	27,284	40,403	62,068	71,089	76,056
UAE	3,117	4,656	14,453	14,463	23,431	37,599	44,029	76,429
Egypt	1,429	1,428	3,980	10,043	13,160	13,135	28,507	33,672
Libya	86	87	3,306	2,857	7,083	8,158	4,269	3,219
Syria	--	33	376	1,681	555	438	849	1,661

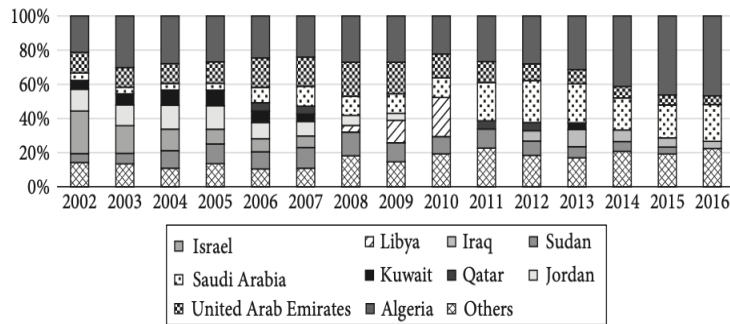
Source: 2010 Statistical Bulletin of China's Outward Foreign Direct Investment produced by Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, National Bureau of Statistics, and State Administration of Foreign Exchange.p.42-44. Compiled by the author.

Table 3: 2011-2016 China's Outward Foreign Direct Investment Stock in WANA (Unit: US\$)

Country	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Iran	135,156	207,046	285,120	348,415	294,919	333,081
Iraq	60,591	75,432	31,706	37,584	38,812	55,781
Saudi Arabia	88,314	120,586	174,706	198,743	243,439	260,729
United Arab Emirates	117,450	133,678	151,457	233,345	460,284	488,830
Egypt	40,317	45,919	51,113	65,711	66,315	88,891
Libya	6,778	6,519	10,882	10,894	10,577	21,112
Syria	1,483	1,446	641	1,455	1,100	1,031

Source: 2016 Statistical Bulletin of China's Outward Foreign Direct Investment produced by Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, National Bureau of Statistics, and State Administration of Foreign Exchange.p.50-52. Compiled by the author.

Figure 2: Largest communities of Chinese workers in WANA



Source: Department of Trade and External Economic Relations Statistics, National Bureau of Statistics of China (various years). Compiled by Andrea Ghiselli in his book *Protecting China's Interests Oversea*, p. 90⁸¹

Scope of China's Influence over the disputing parties in the Syrian conflict

China does not have sufficient influence over either the Syrian government or the opposition parties. As illustrated above, China does not possess many concrete economic activities such as investment or energy demand, which results in the lack of resources that can be converted into a “nudging and assistance” strategy. Therefore, China does not have many tools to push disputing parties in the Syrian conflict to agree upon a ceasefire or an agreement.

China does not have sufficient influence over the Assad regime. China has consistently been vocal about Syria's struggle against Ameri-

can imperialism and Israeli Zionism and fighting for national liberation, unity, and prosperity. However, such support involves providing political support without much economic and military support. Syria once had hoped China would play a more significant role in supporting Syria in international affairs when China retook the seat in the UNSC. China responded to such expectations and was more vocal in defending the right of Syrian and Palestinian people in their justice war yet was limited in doing so. Regarding conflicts in world affairs, China has mainly adopted a “hands-off” style and advocates that the host country and people themselves should resolve the matters. It promotes political resolution and opposes military intervention. China applied this doctrine to the Syrian conflict. China has proposed that the Syrian people should be at the forefront of deciding events in their own country, including the country’s future, the formation of the government, and the constitution. At large, the Arab people could intervene and help Syrians as Syria is a part of Arab countries. The most assertive approach of China in supporting the Syrian government is that China has kept calling for a political resolution and blocked any attempts that may lead to a military intervention in the draft resolutions in the UNSC. As Chinese President Xi Jinping pointed out in his phone call with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad on 5 November 2021 that ‘China has firmly supported Syria in safeguarding its national sovereignty, territorial integrity and national dignity, and firmly opposes interference by external forces in Syria’s internal affairs.’⁸²

The Assad regime is aware of the limitation of China’s support in maintaining his rule in Syria. Since the outbreak of the conflict, the Syrian government’s expectation of China in the Syrian conflict was more involved in defending Syria’s government’s right to deal with its domestic affairs without foreign interventions through UN system. Such expectations were expressed repeatedly in official meetings between China and Syria. For example, on 24 December 2015, in a meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, Syrian Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Walid Muallem expressed that Syria shall never forget that China has always supported a political solution to the Syrian issue. He also emphasised that the Syrian government hopes China will play a more active role as a permanent member of the Security Council.⁸³ Furthermore, Assad’s regime re-

lies more on Iran and Russia as they can provide more concrete economic and military support to fight against oppositions, external actors, and terrorist forces. Thus, China's influence to persuade or push the Assad regime to make certain moves is limited. Although in the later phase of the Syrian conflict in 2018, China and Syria both expressed the willingness of China playing an essential role in the post-war reconstruction in Syria. Syria also has joined China's Belt and Road Initiative, yet due to the uncertainty of the ongoing war, such mutual willingness has not materialized in concrete action.

China does not have adequate knowledge or experience in dealing with opposition in the Syrian conflict, let alone having any influence over them. China mainly interacts with regional governments due to its fundamental principle of Non-interference in its foreign policy. China has been very cautious in establishing contact with opposition parties in a country, excluding the revolutionary period under Mao in the 1950s and 1960s. In terms of getting involved in a conflict, the Chinese approach is very different from Western countries. According to Liu Zhongming, the director of the Middle East Studies Institute of Shanghai International Studies University, the approach of Western countries is more "bottom-up" style. Western countries are good at selecting agents in Middle Eastern countries who hold the same values about democracy and freedom as Western countries and, therefore, can help safeguard Western countries' interests. Western countries would select, cultivate, and may also equip agents with weapons. Such an approach sometimes leads to the escalation or the loss of control of the war. In contrast, as Liu argues, China's diplomacy on hotspot issues in the Middle East mostly chooses a "top-down" approach. Although it does establish contacts with the opposition in a conflict (such as the Taliban in Afghanistan), it mainly consults with the central government of the host country. China does not support the opposition forces within sovereign countries seeking secession or independence, let alone pull one faction against another.⁸⁴ However, such a "top-down" approach also constrained China's appropriate and timely response to a conflict to defend its interests more effectively. As Liu further analysed, 'the insufficient channels for effective communication with the opposition forces, the lack of knowledge and experts on opposition forces in the region, and the limited role of non-government organisations that can be a supple-

mentary force for intergovernmental exchanges have handicapped China's interaction with opposition parties in a conflict. As a result, China's policies towards the opposition parties in a conflict are often lagging behind Western countries, decreasing China's influence in the course of the event and in regional affairs.⁸⁵

China learned from its experience dealing with the Libyan conflict and started interacting with Syrian opposition parties relatively early. China has been very cautious in the Libyan conflict and has yet to establish contact with the opposition forces and offer timely recognition of the NTC as other countries did, resulting in substantial loss of economic opportunities and interests.⁸⁶ Thus, China has been trying to be more flexible and adopted "creative intervention" in the Syrian conflict, as it has invited and met with opposition parties from Syria multiple times since the outbreak of the Syrian war. On the surface, it is the Peoples' Diplomacy Institute (中国人民外交学会), a quasi-official organisation rather than the Chinese government that invited the opposition parties, in order to divert criticism of changing its Non-interference principle, but its officials such as the Foreign Minister, Vice Foreign Minister, and Special Envoy to the Middle East will hold meetings with Syrian opposition delegations. By doing so, it manages to hedge on both sides while preserving its Non-interference principle.⁸⁷ However, the level of engagement with the Syrian opposition parties remained low. Getting to know each other, expounding China's stances, and policies, and learning about the views and opinions of various parties in the Syrian conflict as much as possible constitute the main content of such interactions.

For example, from 6 to 9 February 2012, at the invitation of the Peoples' Diplomacy Institute, Haytham Manna, Deputy General Coordinator of Syria's National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change and head of the external branch of the Syrian National Coordination Body for Democratic Change, led a delegation to visit China. During the visit, Vice Foreign Minister Zhai Jun and officials from the Department of West Asia and North African Affairs held talks with the delegation. Chinese officials adopted a balanced manner in their conversations with opposition delegation. On the one hand, they called on the Syrian government to respond to people's demands by expressing that 'the Syrian people's reasonable aspira-

tion for change and protection of their interests should be respected. The Syrian Government should honour its commitment of reform in real earnest, launch the inclusive political process with the extensive involvement of all parties as soon as possible and remove differences through dialogue and consultation.' On the other hand, China called on all parties, including the Syrian government and the opposition parties, to 'cease all violence, take concrete measures to ease the tension and avoid civilian casualties.' After that, China underlined its role as an impartial, objective, fair and genuine peacemaker in the Syrian conflict, by stating that 'China, as a friend of the entire Syrian people, seeks no selfish interests on the Syrian issue. It neither shelters nor intentionally opposes anyone. On the contrary, we bear in mind the fundamental interests of the Syrian people, peace and stability of the Middle East region and relevant norms governing international relations.' To this end, 'we keep in contact and communication with all relevant parties of the Syrian issue, opposition parties included, with a view to promoting peace talks. We have done a great deal to ease the tension in Syria. China will continue to enhance communication with relevant parties in Syria so as to dissolve the Syrian crisis peacefully and appropriately through unremitting efforts.'⁸⁸ Similar stances and positions were expressed in meetings between China's officials and representatives of Syrian opposition parties until 2016.

The level of great power consensus is low

The international consensus on resolving the Syrian issue is high, which motivates China to intervene as a mediator to fulfil its image as a responsible great power. The Syrian conflict has been going on for more than a decade. From the beginning of the conflict until the present, the Syrian conflict has been at the centre of the world's attention. Not only because of the humanitarian catastrophe it has caused but also due to the exacerbation of problems caused by the Syrian issue, such as the rise of the Islamic State and the refugee crisis, which has significantly influenced the Middle East, and the world. Therefore, the international community has a strong consensus on resolving the Syrian issue. With such a strong consensus, China felt the urgency to assume an active peace-maker role in conflict management in the Syrian conflict as a permanent member of the UNSC and a fast-developed global power. Liu and Fan argue that

China's participation in hotspot issues in the Middle East is not only a consideration of practical interests but also the result of awareness of international responsibilities. With the significant increase in China's comprehensive national strength in recent years, the international community's expectations of China to assume more responsibility, provide more public goods, and maintain international order and stability have become ever higher. As for the Middle East region, China is also responsible for promoting peace, stability, and development as a UNSC member and a major developing country.⁸⁹

Such expectation has been mirrored in domestic China as well. A report about the Arab Uprisings in the eyes of Chinese students was published in the Yellow Book of the Middle East- Annual Report on Development in the Middle East No.15 (2012-2013) by the Chinese Social Science Academic Press. The research has shown that only 26% of interviewed Chinese university students believe Chinese foreign policy towards the Arab Uprising, such as the Libyan War and the Syrian War, is active. 27% of students believe it is becoming more active. 36% of students believe that Chinese foreign policy has been passive. Moreover, 11% of students do not have an impression of any Chinese foreign policy conducted in response to the Arab Uprising. Students have also expressed in the discussion that China's diplomacy should strive for more discourse power on Middle Eastern affairs, change its image of being a passive and reactive power, and initiate more proactive actions according to its interests.⁹⁰ This internal and external expectation for greater responsibility explains the correlation between the traction and attention of a conflict in the international community and China's likelihood to be involved in some form of conflict mediation. It explains China's quasi-mediation in the Syrian conflict and appointing a special envoy on the Syrian issue to mark its presence.

Nonetheless, the consensus among the international community over how to address the conflict is not always high. The UNSC members often holds different policies over the draft resolutions concerning the policies and actions taken by the Assad regime on its people and the position of the Assad regime in the future of Syria. China and Russia vetoed draft resolutions proposed by the West altogether seven times, often leading to a deadlock in the negotiation. Regional and

international actors have sided with different parties in the Syrian conflict, making reaching a consensus more complicated and challenging. The rise of ISIS and other terrorist groups added another layer to the complication of the Syrian conflict. Therefore, different actors have tried to mediate between different parties, including the Arab League, UN special envoys, Russia, the West, Turkey, and Iran, with many resources invested but failing to deliver results. Facing such a reality, China conducts a limited intercession strategy without committing many resources.

Intractability of the crisis and difficulty of settlement

The Chinese government has been reluctant and detached from implementing genuine mediation because the level of the intractability of the settlement for the Syrian conflict is very high. As mentioned above, various countries and regional and international organisations have attempted to mediate the Syrian conflict yet failed to bring a durable peace. China, which has little motivation, few resources to be allocated, little experience dealing with various opposition forces, and comparatively less leverage over the Syrian government, naturally found the Syrian conflict extremely difficult to manage. Thus, it avoided playing an active role in conflict management and allocating too much resources. As China's top strategist Yan Xuetong once mentioned in an interview regarding China's role in the Syrian conflict, 'China becoming a superpower does not necessarily mean that China needs to get involved in Middle East affairs. Afghanistan is a cemetery where superpowers are buried, and the Middle East is a swamp where superpowers are trapped. Economically, China could expand and deepen its cooperation with Middle Eastern countries. However, it would be better politically if China only expressed its stance and position.' Yan also argues that the U.S. is far more powerful than China, but is nevertheless incapable of resolving the Syrian issue. Instead, the U.S. was criticised by both sides of the conflict. Therefore, Yan suggests that China should not repeat the sort of policy followed by the U.S. The complexity of Middle East politics far exceeds China's ability to comprehend. Yan says, 'Do not jump in if you cannot fully comprehend the situation. Otherwise, you will drown before you know.'⁹¹

Chinese policymakers indeed found the Syrian conflict very challenging to escape from. In May 2022, an article published on the Chinese People's Liberation Army's official news website commented that 'it is no easy task for the Assad government to achieve a comprehensive peace in a short period. On the one hand, a comprehensive political settlement does not yet exist. The two primary forces, the "Syrian National Army" and the "Syrian Democratic Forces", are controlled by other countries, making it almost impossible to achieve political reconciliation with the Syrian government in the short term. On the other hand, the Syrian government is also unwilling to cooperate with extremist organisations stained with the blood of Syrian soldiers and civilians. Moreover, the Syrian government is too powerless to achieve unification with force as the war has worn out the national strength'.⁹²

Conclusion

China has conducted a limited intercession strategy in its quasi-mediation diplomacy regardless of the repeated rhetoric representing itself as an impartial, patient, and genuine mediator who tirelessly carries out shuttle diplomacy among various parties concerned in the Syrian conflict to push for a political resolution. In China's quasi-mediation, it devoted insignificant diplomatic resources, mostly lower-ranking officials participated directly in the process, and it participated lightly in the mediation process led by other actors. While China did ultimately initiate quasi-mediation independently, and even appointed its first-ever special envoy on the Syrian issue, nevertheless, the content of such diplomatic gestures was mainly constituted of expounding the Chinese government's stance, principles, and policies on the Syrian issue and facilitating the communication between different parties concerned. Chinese officials failed to bring any original framework, roadmap, or effective measures to achieve a political resolution. In analysing the timing China initiated the quasi-mediation diplomacy, it is clear that it frequently followed occasions when China and Russia vetoed a draft resolution proposed by either the Western countries or the Arab countries in the UNSC. The decision to send special envoys and representatives to these countries was motivated by attempts to both ease the hostility of some countries towards China due to its unpopular vote and secure the trust and sup-

port of these countries, but also to mark its presence in the peace-making process to fulfil its responsible power image.

Regarding the factors accounting for China's superficial, cautious, and calculated approach to conflict management in the Syrian conflict, it is argued in this paper that China has limited national interests in Syria, thus has less motivation and urgency to get deeply involved and embedded in the conflict. China does not have sufficient leverage over the Assad regime or the opposition parties to push either side to pursue an agreement. The lack of knowledge, experience, and expertise on Syrian affairs discourages China from putting its feet in a conflict that is so complicated, enduring, and challenging to manage.

In July 2022, a Chinese movie titled "Home Operation" was produced by world famous Chinese actor Jackie Chan and endorsed by the Chinese government as the Chinese Ambassador to Syria attended the opening ceremony in Syria. Li Zhaoxing, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs of China, served as the General Counsel for the movie. The movie was partly filmed in the Syrian city of al-Hajar al-Aswad in the southern part of the capital Damascus. The movie is about the evacuation of Chinese nationals by the Chinese government at the peak of the Yemen War in 2015, to promote the patriotic spirit and increase the legitimacy of the rule of the Communist Party of China. In addition to successfully evacuating its nationals, it was also the first time that the Chinese navy helped evacuate foreign nationals in a dangerous area. According to Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying this 'truly reflects the Chinese government's "people-oriented" philosophy and the spirit of internationalism and humanitarianism.'⁹³ Nevertheless, the movie was filmed 'on the ruins of Syrian homes that were destroyed by the Assad regime, Russia and Iran.'⁹⁴ There is a clear contradiction between the words of Hua Chunying and the reality of filming in this location. A Syrian crew member involved in production of the movie production summarised that the reason for using the location was 'building studios similar to this area is very expensive, here the studio is already ready.' He added that there are also film productions from Iran and Russia.⁹⁵ Such behaviour by Chinese citizens and officials certainly did not represent the spirit of internationalism and humanitarianism

nor the people-oriented philosophy in Chinese foreign policy in the eyes of Syrian activists. Syrian activists accused the Chinese movie of insensitivity in causing psychological harm to Syrians whose homes were destroyed and had lost loved ones due to attack by the Assad regime. They argued that ‘The Chinese who came and filmed this movie should respect the Syrians whose homes were bombed and destroyed, leading to many Syrians becoming displaced.’⁹⁶ A decision to benefit culturally from the destruction of the conflict for patriotic value exemplifies the wider choices and behaviours of China towards conflicts in the Middle East. This contradiction of rhetoric and action is a microcosm for the wider involvement of China in conflict management; China is a self-interested great power rather than a responsible great power as it claimed.

Footnotes

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⁹⁵ The content of the official account of *Russia Today* (@今日俄罗斯) on Chinese social media platform Sina Weibo (新浪微博), 19 July 2022. Available at: <https://m.weibo.cn/status/4793802260483408>

⁹⁶ “Jackie Chan produces movie filmed in Syrian town flattened by Assad bombing”, *The New Arab*, 17 July 2022. Available at: <https://www.newarab.com/news/jackie-chan-production-filmed-war-scenes-syrian-ruins>